

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Postal Service Tells Plaskett It Will Improve Scanning Of VI Mail Held By Customs In PR; Attempts To Explain Use Of International Express Mail Form

Federal / **Published On February 12, 2019 09:00 AM /**

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The U.S. Postal Service has told Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett that it will improve the scanning of Virgin Islands mail that are held for review by Customs to ensure better tracking of goods. The Postal Service also attempted to explained what is says is a change in its system that now requires clerks to ask customers to fill out a certain Customs declarations form.

The query from Ms. Plaskett and the responses from USPS follow two stories published by The Consortium last week on both matters. The first [***detailed the frustration of***](#)

[Postal Service employees on St. Croix](#), who have been using USPS's International Express Mail form to ship items to the U.S. from the U.S. Virgin Islands. Postal Service employees told The Consortium that this form is to be used only if shipping to an international destination from U.S. and its territories. They said the use of the International Express Mail form to ship items to the U.S., which they say the Postal Service blamed on a glitch in the system that needed to be fixed, has slowed service and caused long lines. Also, the International Express Mail form stands to further confuse mainland businesses, many of whom already struggle with recognizing the U.S. Virgin Islands as part of the United States.

The problem has lagged on for over four months, according to a Postal Service employee. This person said Postal Service leadership has demonstrated no urgency to rectify the matter.

In its response to our article, the Postal Service told Ms. Plaskett that a regulation enacted by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection in 2011 requires all mail that enters the Customs territory of the U.S. (CTUS), from outside the CTUS, to bear a customs declaration label.

"This is required by Code of Federal Regulations, Title 19, Part 145. This means it applies to American Samoa, Guam, Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Marshall Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Some postal clerks may have been unaware of this requirement. A recent software systems change now prompts the clerks to ask customers to fill out the required Customs declarations form, which is why you are likely hearing about it now from some constituents," Ms. Plaskett said in a statement.

Her response, however, does not appear to be in line with the complaints of the Postal Service employees on St. Croix, who contend that they are using a wrong form to ship Express to the U.S. mainland from the U.S. Virgin Islands because of a system glitch that local Postal Service officials have vowed to fix but as of last week had yet to take action on.

USVI mail with frozen seafood "lost" in Puerto Rico

On the matter of seafood such as conch and lobster being sent to the U.S. mainland by St. Croix residents and [getting lost in Puerto Rico](#), Ms. Plaskett said the Postal Service has said it will do a better job to scan items held for review by Customs so as to better document the process.

One of two employees who spoke with The Consortium on the condition of anonymity last week, said since December 2018, fifteen packages with lobster and conch never made it out of Puerto Rico. This employee said one customer spent almost \$200 recently shipping conch and other seafood to his family, "and the last scan was in Puerto Rico," the employee said. Though the U.S. Postal Service reimburses the cost of shipping if items get lost, it does not cover the cost of the goods.

Even so, another Postal Service employee said last week that while the "lost" seafood was a problem, the bigger issue was that the Postal Service's office in Puerto Rico which handles U.S. Virgin Islands mail, is supposed to scan the territory's mail that are stopped

by Customs into the USPS system. But the office, for years, had not done so.

This employee said while it's not a consistent occurrence, Customs sometimes hold frozen packages. On a number of occasions, Customs officers have found items that are not permitted to be shipped through the Postal Service. And because the goods are frozen, they oftentimes spoil during the holdup process and are therefore not shipped to their mainland destination. The Postal Service office in Puerto Rico responsible for scanning the items stopped by Customs is called the San Juan Processing and Distribution Center, located at 585 Ave. FD Roosevelt San Juan, Pr.

"The Post Office should have an employee scanning the packages in and out of Puerto Rico, and that's not being done," this Postal Service employee said. Because the items stopped by Customs are not scanned into the system, when residents visit local Postal Service branches inquiring of the seafood shipped Express Mail to the U.S. mainland, the Postal Service has no other choice but to reimburse the customer for the cost of shipment — not the cost of the actual goods.

"The scan proves that law enforcement has it, and if it's not scanned, we have to reimburse," this employee said.

After speaking with Postal Service officials on the matter, Ms. Plaskett explained: "Seafood shipments: These perishable items go through Customs first. If Customs determines that the items have spoiled, they are returned to USPS to be decommissioned. Postal staff are supposed to scan the items as "dead mail," and they are reminding their staff to do so when feasible. We have since learned that one of the problems is that the labels themselves often become waterlogged if the ice has melted, making them impossible to scan or read. The Post Office will work to improve their scanning of items identified as spoiled which will give more accurate information, sooner, to those who mail perishable goods."